

## Chapter Six: School Selection



The issue of school selection may come up when a student is initially enrolling, but it may also come up for a student, recently identified as homeless, who is already attending a particular school. According to the McKinney-Vento Act, students have two school placement options:

- the school of origin or
- the school that nonhomeless students who live in the attendance area where the homeless student is temporarily residing are eligible to attend [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(A)].

*School of origin* is defined as “the school the child or youth attended when permanently housed or the school in which the child or youth was last enrolled” [42 U.S.C. § 11432(g)(3)(G)]. Due to the high mobility experienced by homeless students, a student may have attended another school since becoming homeless. This would mean that the student would actually have three options for school selection: the local attendance area school, the school the student attended prior to becoming homeless, or the school the student attended most recently.

The duration of homelessness that a family or unaccompanied youth experiences may be brief, or it may last a long time; as a result of this variability, the law addresses how long a student is eligible to attend the school of origin. A homeless student may attend a school of origin for the entire duration of the homelessness or until the end of any school year in which the student becomes permanently housed [42 U.S.C. 42 § 11432(g)(3)(A)(i)]. Students who become homeless over the course of a summer may also remain in their schools of origin for the upcoming school year.

Regardless of the school option chosen, the placement of students experiencing homelessness should always be based on the student’s best interest.

## Section 6.1 Best Interest and Feasibility

The task of choosing which school a student should attend can, at times, be a daunting one. Regardless of the choice ultimately made, the best interest of the student is the determining factor for decisions about school placement. To the extent feasible, a student should remain in the school of origin, unless doing so directly contradicts the desires of the parents, guardians, or unaccompanied homeless youth [42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(3)(B)]. Frequent school changes can have a negative impact on a student's education; by allowing a student to remain in the school of origin, the potential harm to a student's educational outcomes while homeless is reduced. However, remaining in the school of origin may not always be in the best interest of a student. For example, issues such as domestic violence or other personal safety concerns could indicate that the local attendance area school would be a better choice for school selection.

The U.S. Department of Education has provided a brief list of issues that districts should consider when determining feasibility in its Non-regulatory Guidance for the McKinney-Vento Act (G-4, 2004). Issues that should be considered include, but are not limited to,

- the student's age,
- the length of the commute to and from school and its impact on the student's education,
- personal safety issues,
- the need for special instruction,
- the anticipated length of stay in a temporary residence or area, and
- the time remaining in the school year.

All decisions about school placement must be made on a case-by-case basis given the myriad of variables involved. A checklist of issues to consider may help liaisons make determinations; Appendix 6.A contains a sample checklist that can be adapted to fit your district's needs. If a district has large numbers of homeless and highly mobile students, it may be beneficial to train several staff members to assist parents in this decision-making process.

If a district sends a student to a school other than the school requested by the parent, guardian, or unaccompanied youth, the school must provide a written explanation to the student's family or the unaccompanied youth. The written notice must also include information on how to appeal the LEA's decision.

More information on the resolution of such disputes will be covered in Chapter 8 Dispute Resolution.

## Section 6.2 Additional Considerations

The McKinney-Vento Act requires that district policies and procedures are reviewed regularly to ensure that no barriers to academic engagement and success exist for homeless students. As a part of your district review, it is advisable to examine your process for making best interest or feasibility determinations. For example, over time, bus routes may change, affecting the impact of the commute on students' educations.

Another important consideration is the impact of transitions on homeless students. If enrolling in a new school is in the best interest of the student, many simple things can be done at the school and classroom level to minimize the negative impact the change, while maximizing student resiliency. Liaisons should encourage teachers and principals to:

- take time to talk to and welcome students individually;
- use a get-to-know-you questionnaire or journal assignment;
- give a “welcome gift” (school supplies, school clothes, etc.);
- introduce new students to the class;
- identify faculty and peer mentors or buddies;
- keep a short, simple written list of classroom rules and procedures;
- make sure the students have a chance to have a class job or role and to participate in extracurricular activities;
- have school personnel meet with parents and students when registering;
- create an orientation video for parents, service providers, and students;
- start files and a portfolio of class work for students to take with them when leaving the school;
- establish school and classroom-level routines for incoming and departing transfers; and
- make it possible for high school students to obtain credit even if they transfer to another school in mid-semester.

For more information on smoothing transitions, see Section 6.3 Useful Links.

In addition to removing barriers and smoothing transitions, liaisons should note whether their state or local policies allow school enrollment options beyond the school of origin and local attendance area school. Many LEAs have open enrollment policies that offer additional options for school enrollment. Alternative education programs or charter schools may be available and meet a homeless student's needs. Furthermore, some homeless students with disabilities may need an alternative placement due to their Individualized Education Program. Liaisons should work with the program coordinators for these other programs or schools to ensure appropriate enrollment in the student's best interest. See Chapter 11 Collaboration for information on working with other programs.

### Section 6.3 Useful Links

**Issue Brief: *Guiding the Discussion on School Selection***

[http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/sch\\_sel\\_checklist.pdf](http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/sch_sel_checklist.pdf)

**Issue Brief: *School Selection***

[http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/school\\_selection.pdf](http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/briefs/school_selection.pdf)

***Classrooms with Revolving Doors: Recommended Practices for Elementary Teachers of At-Risk and Highly Mobile Students***

[http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/eff\\_teach\\_elem.pdf](http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/eff_teach_elem.pdf)

***Classrooms with Revolving Doors: Recommended Practices for Middle Level and High School Teachers of At-Risk and Highly Mobile Students***

[http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/eff\\_teach\\_mh.pdf](http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/eff_teach_mh.pdf)

### Section 6.4 Resources and Tools for Chapter Six

Appendix 6.A School Selection Checklist for Decision-Making